

UKMA news

The newsletter of the UK Metric Association:
campaigning for a **single** rational system of measurement

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AGM AND CONFERENCE: REPORTS

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA



Our AGM/Annual Conference took place in the aftermath of the 7 July terrorist bombings in London, and at one time there was serious doubt whether we should go ahead. In the event, public transport was largely restored, and 19 members were able to get to

the University of Westminster venue - our largest attendance so far.

This larger attendance (which included some new members) meant that discussion had to be a little less informal than in previous years, but it was still possible for everybody to make a contribution.

Formal AGM business was disposed of in less than an hour. It was decided to increase the annual membership subscription from £10 to £15 - still a relatively token amount compared with the actual running cost of over £20 per member. There is to be no change in the annual renewal arrangements, but it is hoped that members will regard the £15 as a minimum and donate generously to support future projects. Funds in hand were reported

as £852, which will not go very far!

Changing into conference mode, the meeting went on to discuss broad strategy, led by Roddy Urquhart and Robin Paice. For those with internet access, the 'Powerpoint' presentations are all available in Smartgroups files at

<http://www.smartgroups.com/vault/metric/AGM%20Conf%202005?viewtype=Detailed&shownum=20&sort=type&dir=asc&startrow=1>

A number of future projects were proposed and supported - including further VBM-type reports, attending and participating in conferences, revising the 2002 style guide, and trying to obtain funding for a major research report into the costs and benefits of completing metrication.

Concluding the morning session, Chris Keenan reported briefly on progress with the UKMA website, quoting statistics obtained by webmaster, Phil Hall.

Following a short lunch break, Justin Wastnage then gave a talk about how the Freedom of Information Act can be used to obtain information to support our case. It appears that there are various obstacles which need to be overcome (mostly related to the cost of responding to vague inquiries), and the main lesson of the first few months of the Act is that it is necessary to define questions very precisely.

Robin Paice then took the conference through the partial draft of our forthcoming report "Road signs - another British mess". The general view was that we should go ahead and publish but that it should be targeted at "decision-makers" rather than at the media or the general public (in any case, we have no funds for a glossy publication).

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AGM & CONFERENCE REPORTS

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Roddy Urquhart outlined possible options for UKMA's legal structure. It was felt that charitable status would not be appropriate since this would inhibit our campaigning activities. Although no immediate change is contemplated, if membership continues to grow, it may be necessary to consider changing UKMA to a company limited by guarantee.

Robin Paice then outlined the problems surrounding the planned phasing out of "supplementary indications" (e.g. giving weights in lbs as well as kg), and how this could be affected by the American failure so far to amend the US Fair Packaging and Labeling Act. Though this was felt by some to be an esoteric subject, there was support for continued lobbying of the DTI, EU and politicians to ensure that there is no further reprieve for pounds and ounces.

Finally, as we were winding up, Markus Kuhn drew attention to the proposed European clothing sizes initiative, spearheaded by the British Standards Institution, based on cm intervals and pictograms. To illustrate the simplicity of the new system, Markus produced a card bearing a complete pictogram of his own body measurements, and we hope to hear more about this topic in a future newsletter.

Discussion was still in full swing when closing time was reached. It was generally adjudged to have been a successful and enjoyable day.

VISIT TO THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA

A day at the Archives - research into how Roads Metrication was derailed in the 1970s

When I made a *Freedom of Information* request to the Department for Transport (DfT) to release documents relating to the decision to metricate and then not to metricate Britain's road signage, I was told that the DfT no longer held the papers. They had been transferred to The National

Archives in Kew. Accordingly, as I was due to arrive in London on 8 July for the AGM/Annual Conference the following day, I made arrangements to visit The National Archives, registering as a reader and ordering four files to be ready for me when I arrived.

Unfortunately, the dreadful events of 7 July disrupted this programme, resulting in my journey to Kew being so delayed that instead of the two or three hours which I had planned, I was left with only 25 minutes before closing time. Nevertheless, it was a worthwhile reconnaissance visit.

Access to the actual genuine documents is relatively unrestricted, though you are not allowed to write in ink but you can take a laptop computer and (by prior arrangement) a camera.

In 25 minutes I obviously could not accomplish much, but I did manage to skim-read parts of a former Ministry of Transport file impressively labelled "Metrication of speed limits and traffic signs: decision to not metricate speed limit signs in 1973; meeting notes; divisional correspondence." Although I could not assemble a complete picture, it was fascinating to read the notes of meetings and the actual handwritten notes between Ministers (including Dick Marsh, then Minister of Transport) and the Assistant Secretary in charge of the metrication project.

What is perfectly clear is that although the initial 1965 announcement of metrication was confined to Board of Trade matters, the Ministry of Transport in the late 1960s was fully - albeit rather reluctantly - committed to the metrication project, and plans were tentatively made to metricate road signage in 1973. The "reluctance" seems to be because metrication was seen as a cost falling on the Ministry's budget with no obvious benefits for road signage or road safety. Nevertheless they felt they had to fall into line with an overall Government project.

However, Labour lost the election in 1970, and this led eventually to the abandonment of the metrication project. What appears to have happened is this.

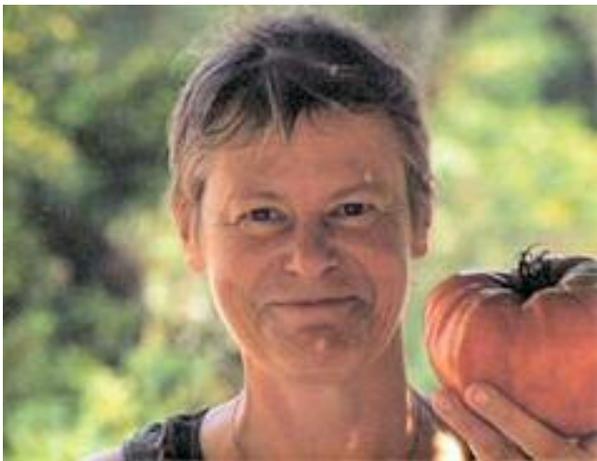
When the new Government took office a review was ordered of the previous government's policy on metrication across all Departments. There seemed to be less enthusiasm or commitment from Ministers,

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LAW WEIGH OUT OF ORDER

by Phil Durden

Where else in the world requires fruit and veg to be sold by the kilo, fabric by the metre, wines and spirits by the millilitre - but bans publicans from dispensing beer in litres, and forbids road signs from showing distances in metres or kilometres? Britain, of course. If you think that's bizarre, spare a thought for the poor lady who has been forced to discard hundreds of labels for her jars of wild rowan jelly which stated the quantities as 110 and 225 grams, and waste two days making new labels with 113 and 227 grams respectively. 113 g is the exact "soft" conversion of 4oz, and 227 g is the equivalent of 8oz or ½ lb.

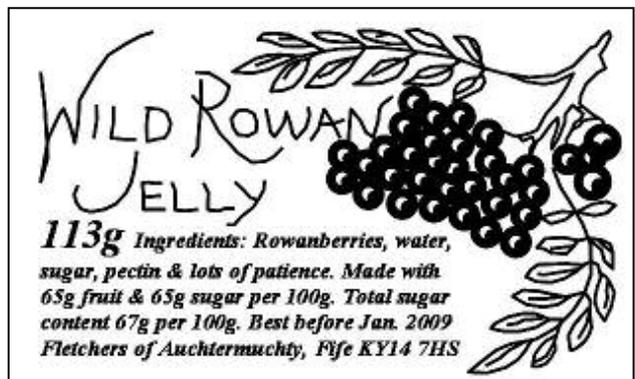


Nichola Fletcher, a venison producer in Scotland (www.nicholafletcher.com) is furious about becoming a victim of a daft UK regulation which prevents manufacturers of preserves from marketing their products in rational metric quantities such as 100 or 200 grams - or even relatively sensible quantities such as 110 and 225 g. Instead, our own regulations (NOT EU directives) make a mockery of Britain's attempt at going metric by forcing people such as Nichola to continue selling jam in what are in effect imperial sizes, albeit with the actual quantity stated in metric.

Because of the daft regulations requiring "imperial-sized" jars, it is extremely difficult to source ones which contain a rational metric quantity, leaving Nichola with no alternative but to use the standard jars. In an attempt to dispense with the awkward-looking 113 and 227 g, she decided to round down the stated quantity to the nearest 5 grams, thus ending up with jars labelled as 110 and 225 g

respectively. Rounding down the weight stated on the label in both instances also meant that there would have been a greatly reduced risk of the jars containing less than the quantity indicated on the label.

Not only has Nichola had to spend valuable time and money re-labelling her jars, but due to the fact that both 113 and 227 g are slightly more than 110 and 225 g, she will need to be absolutely sure that the jars really do contain at least 113 or 227 g, lest some fussy customer accuses her of selling them short by two or three grams. Ever wondered what two or three grams of jelly looks like?



One of Nichola's new, legal, labels

UKMA would like this ridiculous law to be revised to allow manufacturers and processors to use jars containing rational amounts such as 100, 200, 500 g and 1 kg.

Roz Denny, Food Writer and UKMA Member, commented:

"How ironic that a local TSO [Trading Standards Organisation] department pursues a small UK producer of wonderful eco-friendly 'real' meat who packs and sells meat in metric and tries hard to comply with the law on labelling, yet elsewhere in the UK TSO's ignore their legal responsibilities and allow hundreds of market traders and maverick shop keepers to deliberately flout the law by refusing to display price tags, and in some cases to even have scales that register metric".

BBC—UPDATE

UKMA has received a formal reply from the Department of Culture Media & Sport to our submission regarding the BBC's Charter, which outlined our concerns about their lack of policy on measurements. The full documents can be read on Smartgroups, or hard copies are available—contact the editor.

VISIT TO THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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but although there was strong pressure from individual Conservative opponents of metrication, it was not decided at that initial stage to abort the programme. At the same time senior civil servants in the Ministry of Transport were worrying about how the target date of 1973 for metricating road signage could be met. Little progress had been made with preparing plans, and it was felt that there was not enough time to implement the change effectively. Officials were therefore ready to advise Ministers that the 1973 date should be postponed, and Ministers were happy to accept this advice. The Minister for Transport (John - now Lord - Peyton) announced in December 1970 that the 1973 date would not be met and that the Government did not have in mind a new date.

This form of words was probably meant both to placate Conservative critics and to leave open the option of fixing a later date for metrication. Civil servants continued to discuss how long the conversion process should take, and one view was that it should be postponed until the late 1970s.

At this point, my hasty skim reading was interrupted by the bell for closing time, so I cannot complete the story. I would guess, however, that once the pressure for an across-the-board change had slackened, there was no impetus or commitment to metrication within the Transport Ministry (now part of the Department of the Environment), and the project drifted to the end of busy civil servants' priority lists, eventually disappearing from view completely.

Whether this is really what happened I hope to find out from further researches.

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

We welcome back Chris Leonard, who had previously been a member but has now rejoined us after a break, also Richard Laird who is our newest member. Reluctantly, Owen Massey is having to put his membership on hold due to other commitments. Many members have already renewed for the 2005-06 year, but there are several still outstanding. If your subscription is still unpaid, please ensure you renew as soon as you can.

NEW SECRETARY FOUND

Much to the UKMA Committee's relief, we very much welcome **Derek Pollard** as our new secretary. He replaces Roddy Urquhart, who has made a massive contribution during his time as secretary since UKMA's formal foundation. Derek a relatively new member, is a chartered civil & structural engineer and building surveyor.



*Another reminder about VBM:
Don't forget that VBM (A Very British Mess)
can be ordered from your library using ISBN
0750310146, and is now listed on Amazon
with a picture of the front cover.*

Members are also entitled to a 50% discount off the full price of VBM when purchasing through UKMA. Anyone wishing to do so should email books@ukma.org.uk or write to UKMA Books, 10 Pitts Lane, Andover SP10 2HY

Edited and produced by Phil Durden

Do you have any comments about this newsletter, its contents, layout, etc.?

Do you have any suggestions for articles for future newsletters?

Do you prefer postal newsletters or electronic?

Please let me know! phil@durden.clara.co.uk